

The Teaching of Pronunciation to Chinese Students of English

By Cheng Fangzhi

English pronunciation is still unduly neglected or ignored even in some of our colleges or universities. An English phonetic course is usually left to chance or given no place in our teaching or learning. The result as Baker (1992:1) states is that, "advanced students find that they can improve all aspects of their proficiency in English except their pronunciation, and mistakes which have been repeated for years are impossible to eradicate." The long-term solution to this problem, I would suggest, is to have a compulsory phonetics course since an active command of pronunciation will help promote the entire learning process.

The faculty members in our teachers' colleges highly value the English phonetics course. We believe that to become a teacher in a middle school, the student-teacher must acquire accurate pronunciation as well as phonetic knowledge so as to be a model. Our experience has shown that after a year of systematic study of English phonetics, the student-teachers have made great progress in their pronunciation and intonation, which, in turn helps enormously in developing other basic skills, particularly speaking. I would like to present an approach to the pronunciation to the Chinese students of English that has worked for me in the hope it might be of some help to others interested in this area.

I. Comparing both Chinese and English Sound Systems

An essential step in the learning of a new language is to acquire some familiarity with the sound system of that language. By comparing the sound system of the native language with that of the target language, the teacher can predict the likely areas of difficulties that his/her students will encounter and plan teaching strategies accordingly. Having compared the consonant phonemes of English and Chinese, for example, I find that Chinese students have great difficulties with those "gap" consonants, such as /v, ø, ð, ʃ, tʃ, dʒ/. They are often replaced either by another English consonant or by a similar Chinese one. For instance, /v/ in *very* is often pronounced as /w/; /ø/ in *think* as /s/; /tʃ/ in *cheap* like the Chinese "qi" and /dʒ/ in *judge* like Chinese "ji." Moreover, under the influence of Chinese syllabic structure of "consonant+vowel," the students tend to insert vowels between English consonant clusters, or put a vowel after the final consonant. Thus, *spring* and *desk* are produced as /sɔ̃pɔ̃rn/ and /deskɔ̃/ respectively. Since the main distinctive feature in Chinese consonants is aspiration or nonaspiration, the Chinese speaker of English tends to apply the same distinction in English, aspirating the voiced consonants and unaspirating the voiceless consonants. These are some of the reasons that prevent Chinese students from acquiring a native-like accent.

After identifying the consonants which cause the most difficulty for the Chinese students, I use several techniques or a combination of techniques in teaching English consonant phonemes.

These include: 1) a description of the speech organs as the sound is being produced; 2) a diagram of the speech organs; 3) a comparison with the nearest sound in the students' native language; 4) a modification of a known English sound. For example, in dealing with consonant clusters, such as *pl* or *spr*, I first describe and demonstrate the different places and manners of articulation of each consonant; then I ask the students to produce each sound correctly, pay attention to the glide from one place and manner of articulation to another, do the change quickly and without squeezing any vowels into them. Meanwhile, each student is asked to hold a piece of paper in front of his or her mouth to observe the different movement of the paper. The paper is moved by a puff of air in producing aspirated /p/ as in *pay*, and the paper moves very little in producing unaspirated /p/ as in *spray* or in *play*.

II. Perception Before Production

Perception and production refer to the processes of perceiving and producing the sounds. Obviously perception should be more important than production because it provides the necessary means for acquiring the accurate phonemes, the intonation curves, or the stress patterns. Perception is important in the sense that production would be impossible without perception.

Perception training can be done with the teacher as producer or with tape-recorded models, but I would suggest a combination of the two using tape models and teacher-produced models. Of course, teacher-produced models are demanding on the part of the teacher, who should be able to pronounce clearly, correctly, and reliably. It might be better to use teacher-produced models first for the simple reason that seeing the shape of the lips or the amount of tension in the facial muscles can help the students in distinguishing one sound from another.

At the fundamental state of teaching intonation, for example, I first produce the tones of English, asking the students to distinguish high-fall from low-fall, high-rise from low-rise, fall-rise from rise-fall, etc. Then I let them listen to authentic tapes to train the ear. The students should be able to hear the differences between these tones and produce them correctly. They have reached an adequate level of perception and production only when they can recognize the actual use of the different tones in connected speech. Therefore, I ask the students to listen to conversations in *Test Drills of Active Intonation* (Cook 1969) so that they not only discriminate the pitch variation but understand the possible function of the intonation as well.

After the work on perception, I have the students practice in pairs and tape-record their dialogues. Then I develop a follow-up activity by asking some of the students to hum the dialogue instead of actually saying the words. I start by doing this myself, first in English and then in Chinese so as to show the differences between the two languages in using the tones, stress, and rhythm. For another follow-up activity after class, the students are assigned to practice the intonation by imitating the selected recordings. These recordings are of immense help in developing the students' perceptual and productive skills.

III. Teaching Pronunciation in a Meaningful and Motivating Way

Good pronunciation is closely linked with clear oral communication; therefore, it is advisable to place students in a meaningful and contextual situation, rather than present them with a series of isolated sentences as is often the case in pronunciation class in China (if there happens to be one). In practicing the phoneme /ai/, for example, students are made to repeat sentences like "Mike tried five times to get the prize." "Five times five is twenty-five." Though these isolated sentences have a high concentration of the sound to be practiced, they are not sentences frequently used in everyday conversation. The students who are trained in this way tend to make more pronunciation errors when speaking spontaneously. What is more, such a pronunciation class is not motivating. The students sit passively and are bored by the parrot-like repeating task. In order to improve the situation, I have developed the following strategies which I find quite stimulating.

1. Providing meaningful materials. In selecting or designing materials, I have paid special attention to those which contain not only a sufficient concentration of the sound to be practiced, but short dialogues, pair word, or other contextual practices as well. The students first learn stress accompanied by basic intonation in meaningful sentences; then work on the difficult sounds. This meaningful practice has the advantage of making the students aware of the stress and intonation patterns from the beginning. As the course precedes, I choose several articles of various styles from the student textbooks to use as models for practicing linking, rhythm, stress, or intonation. Students feel that the pronunciation class is relevant to their regular course work. Thus, they become active participants in their pair or group work, applying the phonetic rules they have learned to the actual practice. Through these meaningful and contextual activities the students can learn to speak both intelligibly and accurately.

2. Using songs, games, and tongue twisters. Using songs, games, and tongue twisters can increase student motivation in a pronunciation class: motivation is a highly significant factor in pronunciation. The more motivated the student is to improve his speech, the more rewarding the teaching will be.

In choosing songs, my first consideration is that they should be simple enough for the students to practice stress and rhythm as well as individual sounds. In teaching the difficult phoneme /ei/, for example, I make use of the first verse of the song This is the Way:

'This is the 'way we 'wash our 'face, 'Wash our' face, 'wash our 'face, 'This is the 'way we 'wash our 'face At 'seven o'clock in the 'morning.

The teaching procedures include; 1) read the words containing /ei/ sounds; 2) mark out the stress; 3) sing the song to the students; 4) repeat the words chorally, tapping on the desk to establish the rhythm; 5) put the words into the tune. Eventually, the song helps the students pronounce the phoneme /ei/ and allows the weaker ones to feel a real sense of achievement when they are able to sing it.

Using games in a pronunciation class can also increase student motivation. Pronunciation and sound-discrimination games can make practice in this area lively and entertaining. The games I

use most are MINI-BINGO for discriminating sounds and WILD GUESS for practicing the uses of intonation. Sometimes I design the games myself, attempting to make them appropriate to the level and interests of the students. These games have proved to be very stimulating.

Tongue twisters are particularly useful for the students who have unique pronunciation problems. Before I teach the students the English /l/ and /n/, I first ask them to make a clear distinction between the Chinese "l" and "n," then I design a contrastive exercise of rapidly repeating the words *like light night light; night light night* The result has proven to be very effective.

3. Assessing students' progress. Assessing progress is a crucial factor in maintaining student motivation. The teacher should provide learners with information about their performance from time to time so that they may know what they have accomplished and what they still have to do. One style of assessment I have adopted is to use tape recordings to keep a record of the students' progress. At the beginning of the course, each student is given a cassette to record the assigned exercises. The recordings have supplied me with useful information in diagnosing the students' original pronunciation. I listen to the tapes carefully and take detailed notes. In the notes I list such items as the student's personal data and individual pronunciation problems. The personal data is an important indicator of some regional pronunciation problems; it helps me to analyze where some of the students' difficulties lie and to work out plans for those who will need special help to eliminate regional accents. During the term, the students are assigned to use their cassettes at regular intervals to record oral homework or carefully chosen materials with emphasis on particular phonetic points. These assignments include pure imitation tasks and individual work on applying the phonetic rules to actual speech production. For example, when practicing stress and intonation, I ask the students to mark out the stress first; then divide sequences of utterances into separate tone-groups and decide what tones are most suitable to adopt according to the context or the kind of sentence. Although the primary emphasis is on stress and intonation, other phonetic aspects, such as assimilation, incomplete plosion, length, or linking are by no means neglected. After listening to each cassette, I set a consultation period to work with one small group of students at a time, replay their recordings, and offer help to correct their pronunciation errors.

As the students' achievements reach a certain level, I attempt to make the learning process more motivating by involving the students in a speaking activity (a role play, a discussion, a communication game, a story-telling activity, or a speech contest). The aim is to train the students to acquire accurate pronunciation when speaking spontaneously. During these activities I always use a tape recorder so that at the end of each activity the students can listen to themselves and evaluate their own speech.

The value of using tape recorders to assess the students' progress lies in the fact that it can provide immediate feedback and form the basis of individual "pronunciation clinics" with the teacher, or workshops which may be part of a consultation period with a very small number of students. Students know that the teacher will be working with the whole class on certain general priority areas, but it is vital that the students feel that their individual problems are being catered to as well.

IV. Conclusion

Spoken language begins with sounds. In order to make oneself intelligible and to understand the spoken language, one must have a good working knowledge of the pronunciation of that language. Therefore, in English language teaching, attention should be paid to the teaching of pronunciation throughout all stages.

In pronunciation class, it is advisable that the teacher pay more attention to the areas where the students are likely to have problems, and plan his teaching strategies accordingly. Above all, the teacher must involve the students in meaningful and communicative activities and make learning as interesting and motivating as possible.

The strategies mentioned above have proved to be successful in our pronunciation classes. Our research shows that the graduates from our English department are more successful in the middle schools than those who have done little in the phonetic area. We were particularly pleased when we learned that in the annual English Speech Contest held in Binzhou, the instructors of most of the winners were the graduates from our college, who benefited a great deal from their pronunciation class.

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